



Statement Before the

National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service

***“Military Service Hearing: Increasing Awareness
Among Young Americans and Lessening the
Civil-Military Divide”***

A Testimony by:

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify on lessening the civil-military divide and increasing awareness of military service options among young Americans. Healthy civil-military relations are vital to the success of America's constitutional democracy. Today, worrisome trends merit attention and redress in three areas of civil-military relations: national security policymaking, the interaction of the military with broader American society, and politicization of the military. This testimony briefly summarizes a subset of these issues that I believe intersect the mandate of the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service. Wherever possible, I attempt to provide concrete recommendations for the Commission's consideration. I conclude with my recommendation that the United States maintain an All-Volunteer Force (AVF) *and* attend to our responsibilities to manage the challenges an AVF poses to healthy civil-military relations.

The Military and Policymakers

A first prism for evaluating civil-military relations and their implications for national service is the relationship between the nation's senior-most civilian officials and military leaders. Civilian control of the military is a core tenet of the American Constitution. The elective representatives of the people, in the form of the president as commander in chief and the Congress as the sole authorizer for war and holder of the purse strings for all defense activities, are placed above the military in decision-making on issues of national security policy. The responsibility to nominate (in the case of the president) and confirm (in the case of the Senate) civilian officials to oversee the Department of Defense and other executive branch departments and agencies reinforces the priority to be placed on civilian leadership over defense and military matters.

Distrust between the White House and Defense Department has existed across post-Cold War administrations. This distrust manifests most clearly in decisions over the use, role, and duration of forces for operations. Some of that friction is natural and necessary. It has been worsened, however, by the confluence of trends relevant to this Commission's work, many of which are symptoms of, as well as accelerants to, the distrust between policymakers and the military. Those include:

1. A lack of shared experience between senior military officers and the civilian cadres that populate the senior-most levels of government.
2. The lack of educational and experiential opportunities for rising military and civilian leaders to develop norms of interaction, such as through collective scenario-based gaming of political-military issues that are likely to cause friction.
3. The lack of training and employment opportunities for civilians interested in defense matters.¹
4. The disproportionate reduction in positions within the Office of the Secretary of Defense and other civilian-heavy headquarters relative to more modest reductions in senior military ranks.²

¹ Peter Levine. "Building a 21st Century Defense Acquisition Workforce." *War on the Rocks*. May 6, 2019. <https://warontherocks.com/2019/05/building-a-21st-century-defense-acquisition-workforce/>

² "DoD Aims to Save \$1.9 Billion Through Headquarters Restructuring." *U.S. Department of Defense*. May 25, 2016. <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/781732/dod-aims-to-save-19-billion-through-headquarters-restructuring/>; Scott Maucione. "This is how DoD will cut 25 percent of its SES staff by 2022." *Federal News Network*. February 20, 2018. <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/defense/2018/02/this-is-how-dod-will-cut-25-percent-of-its-ses-staff-by-2022/>

5. The public's view of the military as the most trusted institution in the United States and its view of Congress as one of the least trusted institutions in the United States.³

Key Commission Takeaway: For a nation that put civilian control of the military at the center of our civil-military relations culture, we have a shockingly low institutional investment in ensuring the civilian training and know-how to oversee it. The Commission should recommend stronger educational, training, and employment opportunities for those interested in serving the nation's defense in a civilian capacity. For those with civilian control responsibilities below the federal elected level, such as executive branch appointees and senior career civilians working on national security issues, a 1-week training course should be mandatory within the first year of service.

The Military and Society

This Commission is familiar with the challenges of ensuring a strong connection between military members, families, and communities with the broader American society. Its January 2019 interim report summarized the challenges well.⁴ The nation only needs a small percentage of its population to serve in the professional armed forces as we have never aspired to be a militarized nation. However, we are a nation engaged in combat. The gap between that small percent who are bearing the risks and costs of combat and the remainder of society is worrisome for healthy civil-military relations. Exacerbating this worry is the familial, religious, political, and regional concentration of those serving or expressing a propensity to serve, and the limits on the pool of Americans qualified to serve. Trends that lead to a de-facto warrior class, separated from the rest of society by demographics, relationships, and values, is inherently destabilizing to a constitutional democracy and at odds with the stated intent of America's founders. Left unattended, the current divisions between the military and society may well worsen. Notably, given the Commission's specific interests in this hearing, the values expressed by young Americans are not ones commonly associated with today's military. High self-report rates of sexual harassment and sex discrimination, LGBTQ discrimination—including the current transgender ban—and the lack of racial, ethnic, and gender diversity at the senior-most levels of the military all run counter to generational views on society and work. For instance, in one recent poll, so-called Generation Z respondents cited equality as the top cause they wished to see their employer support.⁵ Given that almost half of the Generation Z population will be racial minorities, currently underrepresented at the highest levels of the institution, and of course more than half of the population will be female, a good deal of otherwise inclined talent may choose alternatives to a military life that seems out of step with their own values.

³ Niall McCarthy. "The Institutions Americans Trust Most And Least In 2018." *Forbes*. June 29, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2018/06/29/the-institutions-americans-trust-most-and-least-in-2018-infographic/#7b4841bb2fc8>

⁴ "Interim Report: A Report to the American People, the Congress, and the President" *The National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service*. <https://www.inspire2serve.gov/reports/interim>

⁵ Pranam Lipinski. "3 Ways Gen Z Will Start to Change the Workplace in 2018." *HR Technologist*. January 03, 2018 <https://www.hrtechnologist.com/articles/performance-management-hcm/3-ways-gen-z-will-start-to-change-the-workplace-in-2018/>

Key Commission Takeaway: The propensity to serve can be improved at the margin through better recruitment tools and economic and career incentive structures. For most, however, it will ultimately be tied to the strength of commitment one feels to the nation and its military institutions. We should anticipate difficulty attracting the right mix and number of younger Americans to military service in the absence of demonstrated progress by the military on issues of equity and diversity. The Commission should build on the summary of the societal civil-military challenges it highlights in its Interim Report to reinforce for Congress the profound strategic consequences that this growing disconnect will have in undermining the role and quality of the military.⁶ The Commission should emphasize that, while tailored incentive structures can help recruitment and retention, the success of a professional military within a democratic society will ultimately depend on its ability to reflect the attributes and principles its recruitment pool values.

The Military and Politics

A special subset of the challenges facing the military in American society is its role in the U.S. political system. This issue is significant enough to warrant particular attention. A professional, politically dispassionate military is foundational not only to effective operations but also to healthy democratic practices. A first order problem is the perception, supported by polling data, that the military is itself partisan.⁷ This perception is problematic when held by society at large, but more actively destructive of strategic planning and operations when civilians in government have concerns, rightly or wrongly, about the partisan motivations of the force.

Relating to my earlier point about civilian education, members of the military are trained and educated on these issues, but civilians are not. Civilians need routine training and education on the importance of an apolitical and civilian-subordinated military to the health of American constitutional democracy. They should also be educated on their responsibilities for reinforcing those norms. Moreover, the current level of attention on the military side may no longer be sufficient—some studies have shown that partisan activity on social media by and targeting military personnel is a growing phenomenon.⁸ More education and training would not eliminate all instances of military politicization—such as members of the active and retired military participating as backdrops for political activity—but done early and well, such efforts would reinforce civil-military norms central to our democracy.

Key Commission Takeaway: America's civics education deficit contributes to heightened risks for military politicization. Greater diversity in the pool of those drawn to military service, better training and education, and enforcement of apolitical norms are all important improvements the nation can make on the military side. But civilians bear ultimate responsibility for upholding the apolitical nature of our military and should be better equipped to do so. The Commission

⁶ "Interim Report: A Report to the American People, the Congress, and the President" *The National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service*. <https://www.inspire2serve.gov/reports/interim>

⁷ George R. Altman and Leo Shane, III, "Military Times Survey: Troops Prefer Trump to Clinton by a Huge Margin," *Military Times*, May 9, 2016. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/2016/05/09/military-times-survey-troops-prefer-trump-to-clinton-by-a-huge-margin/>

⁸ Heidi A. Urban, *Like, Comment, Retweet: The State of the Military's Nonpartisan Ethic in the World of Social Media*, National Defense University Press, May 2017.

should draw a direct link between civics and norms of healthy civil-military relations, including the apolitical role of the military and civilians' responsibilities to support it.

Conclusion

I believe the all-Volunteer Force remains the best model for the U.S. military. It delivers the strongest operational outcomes and reinforces American ideals of personnel liberty. In the current and foreseeable security environment, compulsory service should be seen as an emergency lever, accessed and administered through the selective service process. Nevertheless, the AVF creates unique challenges for civil-military relations to which the nation should attend. In the policymaking realm, it creates the illusion of “best military advice” as qualitatively superior to civilian viewpoints.⁹ Societally, too, the AVF can create presumptions about the deference needing to be paid to military viewpoints at the same time that it lessens the societal impact of life-and-death use of force decisions. It is particularly difficult to avoid politicization in an AVF because, absent intervention, the pool of volunteers may themselves reflect a narrow political viewpoint relative to the country’s overall population.

Quality civilian oversight, productive civil-military exchange, a trusted, apolitical, and representative military, and a civilian populace educated in the core tenets and daily practice of the American approach to civil-military relations—these are all ideals that require investment to realize. I thank the Commission on Military, National, and Public Service for examining these issues as it seeks to play its role in tending the garden of American democracy.

⁹ James Golby and Mara Karlin. “Why ‘Best Military Advice’ is Bad for the Military – and Worse for Civilians.” *Orbis*. January 8, 2018, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/01/best-military-advice-bad-military-worse-civilians/>.